



# Elevating Democracy Reporting A Guide for Journalists

## Introduction

In the fast-paced world of political journalism, it's easy to get caught up in the “horse race”—the polls, the predictions and the political dramas that dominate headlines. However, the very essence of our democracy hinges on issues like safeguarding voting rights and ensuring equal access to the democratic process. Journalists must not focus only on the places where civil liberties are being undermined; they must also document who is making progress in addressing those problems and how, and how change is made.

As part of the **Solutions Journalism Network's** seminar series on covering democracy in fall 2023, we asked a number of leading journalists to address the challenges and opportunities in stepping away from the horse race and dedicating more resources to covering democracy. They offered tips on everything from the need to understand the intricacies of election administration to humanizing our coverage and examining progress as well as problems.

The speakers included Ari Berman, national voting rights correspondent for Mother Jones; Natalia Contreras, reporter for Votebeat Texas; Jessica Huseman, editorial director of Votebeat; Ashton Lattimore, editor-in-chief of Prism; and Kira Lerner, democracy editor for The Guardian US. The conversations were moderated by Osita Nwanevu, contributing editor at The New Republic and a columnist at The Guardian.

The **insights** below were distilled from those seminars, and are designed to be a resource for journalists who aspire to provide more comprehensive democracy coverage.

If you have other topics you'd like us to cover, send your ideas to [jaisal \[at\] solutionjournalism.org](mailto:jaisal@solutionjournalism.org). The recorded seminars can be viewed [here](#).



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## STEP AWAY FROM THE HORSE RACE.

There will be plenty of polls and predictions in coverage of any given election, but the threats to democracy and the efforts to shore up voting rights and equal access to the democratic process require special attention and dedicated resources. Create spaces in your coverage to report on democracy specifically — perhaps by skipping horse race stories already being written by other outlets. “I think that a lot of coverage choices come down to like, ‘Well, if we don’t cover this, we’re gonna be the only news organization that isn’t covering this,’ ” said Huseman of Votebeat. “I think that journalists should take better stock of the unique coverage they can offer. And if there is truly a story that you’re only covering because you’re afraid because ... you’ve got FOMO, then democracy is better served by you covering something else.”

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## MAKE THE POLICY STAKES CLEAR.

Solutions reporting can be used to examine the evidence behind policy proposals. Berman of Mother Jones noted much of the media coverage of HR 1, the comprehensive voting rights legislation known as the For The People Act that was introduced in 2019, focused on “inside baseball,” such as who was supporting the legislation, instead of how the proposed policies would work and their potential impacts.

Additionally, voting rights don’t matter only in the abstract. “These fights about voting rights aren’t just about voting rights. They’re about much bigger things and the kind

of society that we want to create,” said Berman. “And some people are pushing to expand voting rights because they want to create a certain kind of society. And certain people are trying to restrict voting rights because they want to maintain a certain kind of society. And I think it’s important to always try to talk about the stakes of these things beyond just the X’s and O’s of some kind of court or legislative fight.”

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### USE A SOLUTIONS FRAME TO COVER WHAT’S WORKING.

Berman also noted that an equal number of laws have made it easier to vote as have made it harder to vote, but the impact of expanded voting rights garners scant attention. Oregon’s first-in-the-nation law for automatic voter registration in 2016 is an example of a simple yet radical idea that [resulted in expanded voter participation](#).

SJN’s [Solutions Story Tracker](#) has a growing collection of stories about where progress is being made in response to challenges to voter access, including those focused on historically marginalized communities — for the formerly incarcerated, for example, and for people who don’t speak English.

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### LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO INNOVATE

When Lerner of The Guardian US started out as a political reporter in Washington, D.C., about a decade ago, she said she “had the same demands that I’m sure a lot of you have working for local outlets where an editor wants a story on polling or a specific Senate race, or who’s up and down in that race ... and I know there’s only so much you can push back when that’s the demand of your newsroom.”

She said she used to do as much as she could to carve out places and ways to also cover access to the ballot and voter suppression and voting. On one of her first assignments, for example, she was in South Dakota to cover a Senate race, and realized she was close to a Native American reservation where there was debate over whether to put a polling place on the reservation. “So I pitched that story and did that in addition to the horse race coverage.”

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### VOTING MECHANICS MATTER.

Running elections is complicated, and threats to voting rights may well be embedded in the minutiae of our election processes. Journalists covering democracy should familiarize themselves with the ins and outs of how elections work and be attentive to administrative details. “Maybe volunteer to register people to vote,” suggested Contreras of Votebeat Texas. “Maybe volunteer to work a poll one day to understand it and really build the relationships with the people that actually run our elections, who are seriously just our neighbors and members of our communities.” Lerner also

recommended getting to know elections officials. “The vast majority of them are just public servants doing their work, and they’re happy to talk to reporters,” she said.

Prism’s Lattimore added that reporters covering democracy can benefit from a basic familiarity with relevant parts of the legal landscape. “That might look like a newsroom sharing a guidebook that explains basic concepts around things like gerrymandering,” she said. “There are also external programs that I know exist for journalists who want to get a more deep grounding in the legal structures that form our democracy.”

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### HUMANIZE YOUR COVERAGE.

Make it clear to readers how policies that impact voting rights and the administration of elections will concretely affect people and their communities. “If you look at litigation, for example, every lawsuit has two names,” said Berman of Mother Jones. “I’m always thinking, ‘Who are those names?’ A lot of times it’s just a regular person that might be challenging this law, and that person can have a really interesting back story.”

In addition, make sure you talk with the people who will be affected by a policy change. “It really frustrates me when I hear these elite political journalists in places like New York and Washington say, ‘Oh, well this or that law is not going to have any impact,’ ” Berman said. “Well, how do they know? Have they interviewed people that have waited for 10 hours to vote? Have they interviewed people that can’t get an ID or have problems with an ID for some reason or another? Have they interviewed people that have been purged from the rolls? Have they interviewed people who have had their polling places shut? Have they interviewed people who can only get to the polls on the weekends because they work during the week? I mean, there are so many things that go into whether or not someone could or could not be able to vote.”

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### COVER MISINFORMATION JUDICIOUSLY.

Make careful editorial decisions about which claims to actively debunk, and how. The Guardian’s focus is on “covering where the misinformation is coming from and who the people and systems and money are behind that piece of information,” said Lerner. That’s especially true, she said, when it comes to misinformation that’s targeting specific groups of people like Latino communities and residents of border towns. “That’s not to say that we won’t have stories focusing on specific nuggets of misinformation and how they’re impacting people,” she added, “but ... those stories will be more about the people impacted and how they learned about it and how the misinformation is spreading more than [they will] just be highlighting what is going around.”



## COVER MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES.

Pay attention to how policies can have an outsized impact. Contreras recommended delving into the experience of voters who have disabilities, or don't speak English. "If we know that we have a large multi-language community ... do we know whether our counties are translating instructions into other languages?" she asked. "What is the law about that? Maybe we need to bring that to the forefront if that hasn't been the case."

Contreras recommended making sure voters at the margins can access your democracy coverage. Votebeat, for example, partners with other outlets, and offers them the opportunity to republish Votebeat's coverage for free. She also suggested exploring platforms that are used by many immigrant communities, like WhatsApp. "Those are kinds of ways that we want to explore in the future, reaching more communities and maybe translating more stories."

